

IDLE SPOTS

BY

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Introduction

The objects I make as a ceramic artist are based on my observations and interaction with the natural world. In nature and within my creative process there is a sense of discovery. There are opportunities to explore new environments and push further in familiar territories. Through texture, form and color the objects are manipulated to represent—but not perfectly duplicate—my findings in nature. I am conscious of the possibilities the material has to offer, responding to how the clay is reacting to the different building processes where the original inspiration can and will change throughout. Nature has provided many of the conceptual ideas behind my work while my background as a carpenter helped me solve technical challenges that arose in the process. It is important that the processes the work undergoes from conception to firing to completing the piece remain evident in the finished work.

Background

I grew up three blocks from Lake Monona in Wisconsin and spent the majority of my childhood outdoors. I occupied my time with limited materials. Playing with sticks, rocks, mud and water made sense because it was most abundant. Using my hands to build and be creative is something I learned early on and eventually took with me later in life, as I became a carpenter. Carpentry most of all, fine-tuned my problem solving skills and helped me to develop a distinct mode of working. As a carpenter you start with a plan, decide how to execute and then do the work. The physicality of construction was also something I enjoyed and found great

reward in. Constructing things has always been in my blood and building with clay seemed like a natural fit for me.

Concepts and Process

“There is pleasure in the pathless woods,
There is rapture on the lonely shore,
There is a society where none intrudes,
By the deep sea and the music in its roar;
I love not man the less, but Nature more.”
—Lord Byron

There is beauty found in nature that is impossible for humans to replicate. I search out this beauty in plants, animals and the land. In searching for beauty in nature there is an acceptance in knowing the outing may be fruitless but there is an equal excitement about the possible discoveries. Rocks, sticks, budding flowers, icicles, bones and countless other things are sources for inspiration. The thoughts and emotions I have about these sources of inspiration is what I bring to the studio. I am not trying to recreate what I find in nature but rather investigate what I find. I interpret, re-interpret and make these objects unique creations that differ from the original inspiration.

A constant in my work has been the dualities in nature- the struggle between the harsh elements of nature and the beauty it is capable of creating. The objects I create are simple but the surfaces are complex. Sections of the piece may be smooth and glossy but contrasted with a matte textured surface. There is also color variation within a piece that either has the possibility of rendering the piece separate from nature or more closely related with nature.

I consider the essays from naturalists (Thoreau, Emerson, Leopold) and wonder how my life and practices fit into their philosophies. Humans have altered nature for progress and we utilize material and change the landscape for our benefit. I question how I fit into that equation and how my actions affect the natural world. I am using material from the earth creating objects inspired by nature. I am a realist knowing as humans we will make a mark on the land. The pieces made reflect the appreciation I have for nature and by using nature as a reference point emphasizes its importance.

Another example from these naturalists is for every action there is a reaction. A river, for example, in normal conditions will follow a regular course. However, in the spring, rain and winter thaw bring more water to the rivers, increasing the flow. The flow carves out the surrounding landscape and reveals rocks and roots. It often drastically changes the course of the river. In contrast, when drought lowers the river underwater vegetation and hidden rocks are revealed. Both scenarios affect what's in and around the river and fish and animals must adapt to the situation.

Clay is a unique material that has the propensity to be both subtractive as well as additive. Clay goes from wet to dry and there are countless ways to fire to create the surface you desire. The surface can also be sandblasted, painted and mixed with other materials. Each phase provides an opportunity to alter the material or form I am working on.

I submerge myself in nature to find inspiration in form, color and texture. I use this as source material for the objects I make. I work intuitively. From mixing the

clay to firing the object, I react to what the material is telling me. I have a conversation with the material, constantly questioning where the piece is headed. I have a plan to begin with and set myself up with parameters knowing the forms will change during the building process.

In firing the work I engage in soda firing, wood firing and Cone 04 Oxidation firing. Soda firing is a process where you fire the work in a gas kiln and at about 2000 degrees Fahrenheit soda bicarbonate and soda ash are introduced into the kiln. The soda reacts with the clay and creates a unique glaze on the surface of the piece. Wood firing is similar to soda firing except that wood is the fuel to fire the kiln and the wood ash reacts with the clay to create a glaze on the surface of the piece. Through soda, wood, and cone 04 oxidation firing, sand blasting and painting the surface treatment reflects natural processes. The flame acts as water in a river moving around boulders. Pieces, with their sides towards the source of flame accumulate the most soda or wood ash. The passing of flame and the addition of soda are visually recorded on the surface of the piece. Sandblasting, like natural erosion, takes away the outer skin and reveals the subsurface and cone 04 oxidation and painting increase the contrast with in the piece.

I am not interested in re-creating natural objects found in nature. I use the forms and my emotional responses to the objects as the conceptual platform for creating works of art. Capturing the essence of my inspiration in the objects I make enables the viewer to go through the same emotions I do in nature and within my

studio. I feel as though I am acting as both a naturalist and biologist while creating my own studies and interpretations of natural objects.

Idle Spots

I travel through the woods and something grabs my attention. A deer unaware of my presence is slowly walking through the woods. This is one of many “Idle Spots” in my life. A place where something makes me stop and take notice. I chose this title because the pieces I create are “Idle Spots” for the viewer.

Individual piece from the show Idle Spots:



This piece is titled “Glancing Skyward” and is based on a story from the book “A Sand County Almanac” by Aldo Leopold. The book has deeply influenced me and the passages so closely relate to my own experiences in nature. I thought it would be appropriate to title the work from “Idle Spots” based on passages from the book. For “Glancing Skyward” the story I am referencing is about geese returning to Wisconsin in the spring after their winter migration. The birds and the sound in the sky announce the return of spring. New life fills the forest and animals come to life. The sounds of the geese represent this change of season. I chose the title “Glancing Skyward”

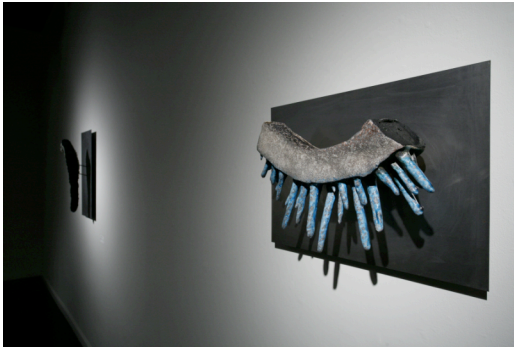
because it has a strong upward motion and I thought about it reaching for the geese as they returned in the spring. I relate to the story and know the excitement I have when I hear the geese. This energy and excitement is also what I felt when I created “Glancing Skyward”. Similar stories and experiences are what led to all the titles for the show “Idle Spots”.

Image of gallery installation:



In this view you can see the installation of my work in the gallery (from where the picture is taken you can't see two of the wall pieces). The wall pieces act as bookends and the pedestal pieces draw a line connecting the two similar wall pieces.

Individual view of Gamblers Chance #1:



In this view you can see Gamblers Chance #1 and in the background Common Abundance #2. On the opposite wall is Gamblers Chance #2 and Common abundance #1. These pieces are on the wall because of the journey they went through in the creative process. Gamblers Chance #1 and #2 were two of the first pieces built in this series of work. They also were two of the last pieces fired. The surface was created by soda firing and the only post firing surface treatment I did was to paint the end of these pieces. The pieces represent both the beginning and the end of this series of work.

Individual view of Common Abundance #1:



Common Abundance #1 and #2 were later pieces in the series of work. They represent my willingness to experiment with additional methods other than soda or wood firing. I didn't give up on these pieces and pushed them until I got the surface I desired. I sand blasted, used cone 04 oxidation and painted the work.

The work was displayed with the wall pieces acting as bookends and the pedestal in a line connecting the wall pieces. This was to contain the work in a unit and to enhance the idea of a body of work. Connections can be made from one end of the gallery to the other. Marks or surfaces from one piece can be compared to similar treatments on another. The viewer can begin to understand there is a dialog between the work and me and between the pieces themselves.

As an artist I give the viewer a sense of who I am. In this show all aspects of my life are evident in the installation of the work. The pieces reference nature and the marks and surface allude to the ceramic process. The pedestals reference my time as a carpenter therefore I felt it necessary to show a high level of craftsmanship. Recessed edges, leaving natural wood grain and a slight depressed area for the work to sit, all echo the skills I learned as a carpenter. The pieces were displayed on sheets of metal that were set into the pedestals. These pieces are my specimens for the viewer to discover, dissect and contemplate. I used metal to reference a scientific table and increase the dualities that I am so interested in nature. The coldness in the metal contrasts the warmth of the objects.

As an artist I reflect on the natural world, my life experiences and these feelings are transformed through clay. The anticipation of discovery in nature and in

my studio is what I am most excited about. I will continue to create objects for the viewer to experience. I will explore new forms and ideas, which will grow and change through my artistic career.

Image Index

The following images correspond to “Idle Spots”.



Gallery Installation View



Gallery Installation View



Gallery Installation View



Gallery Installation View



Thick Crust
Soda and Cone 04 Oxidation
18x20x12



Red Lantern
Cone 04 Oxidation Fired Terracotta
10x16x10



Towering Dignity
Anagama Wood Fired Stoneware
18x28x8



Flashing Tails
Soda, Cone 04 Oxidation and Paint
8x28x5



Smokey Gold
Anagama Wood Fired Stoneware
6x24x8



Flashing Bellies
Soda Fired White Stoneware
7x16x22



River Progress
Anagama Wood Fired Stoneware
12x12x14



Prying and Sucking
Soda Fired Stoneware
19x8x13



Fluttering Host
Cone 04 Oxidation and Paint
11x24x5



Glancing Skyward
Soda Fired Stoneware
13x12x6



Gamblers Chance 1/26/08 #2
Soda Fired Stoneware Mounted on Steel
14x24x6



Common Abundance #1
Soda, Cone 04 Oxidation and Paint
22x14x5